

# Youth Homelessness and Early intervention: Key Characteristics and Challenges

**By Dr Phil Crane,  
Social Work and Human  
Services,  
Faculty of Health,  
Queensland University of  
Technology**

**A**gainst the backdrop of the White Paper it is timely to consider the key requirements for effective early intervention into youth homelessness. Three of these are briefly discussed, namely having a clear conception of what early intervention is; use of a youth-centered, context responsive approach to practice that builds critical connections; and utilising a participatory action research processes to build 'joined up' approaches that are outcomes oriented and evidence generating.

## Conceptualising Early Intervention

The White Paper glossary defines early intervention as *'strategies that aim to reduce risk factors through timely identification and tailored advice and support for those at risk of homelessness'* (p.72). This definition reflects the view that early intervention aims to assist particular people rather than provide intervention at a whole of population, sub-population or community level. Further early intervention provides this support before homelessness occurs. In respect of adult homelessness before homelessness occurs implies support before stable housing is lost. In respect of youth homelessness there has been a view that early intervention occurs before homelessness occurs, or in the case of early home leaving, before the break with home has become permanent and homelessness 'chronic' (Crane and Brannock 1996).

Positioning early intervention in relation to early home leaving can be seen as based on an overly linear notion of how homelessness occurs (Mallet, Nyblom and Jordan). It is now suggested there are a number of major pathways into youth homelessness (Johnson, Gronda and Coutts 2008). Pathways thinking can help turn our attention to young people's interface with particular key institutions that can and often do have a disconnecting effect; families, statutory intervention agencies, health systems, schools. The result is a more nuanced and diverse basis for

identifying opportunities for timely and 'early' intervention, which builds on the robust framework utilised by the Reconnect program. Examining pathways can further illuminate potential opportunities for timely early intervention. Depending on the context the point of initial engagement for practice may range from families, to schools, to health services, to child protection agencies, to supported accommodation, to tenancy support services, and to public spaces ...

The White Paper distinguishes between *'preventing homelessness'* (*'identifying people at risk and ensuring that they have access to the right support before reaching crisis point'*) and *'preventing the causes of homelessness'* (p.24). These correlate with previous distinctions between early intervention and prevention. Overall the position in the White Paper seems to be that early intervention is understood as part of prevention.



Does drawing a distinction between early intervention and prevention matter? On one hand it is understandable that governments want to talk about preventing homelessness and to this extent part of the logic of early intervention needs to be that it contributes to the prevention of homelessness. Otherwise why do it? On the other hand the conflation of the two has been argued as having the effects of shifting responsibility for the prevention of homelessness onto the homelessness service sector, allowing universal and sustained prevention

approaches to be undertaken in a tokenistic and ad hoc way, with early intervention the easiest part of the 'continuum' to develop (Mallet, Nyblom and Jordan). This is not a criticism of early intervention but rather recognition that prevention of homelessness involves far more than strategies targeted at particular individuals. Early intervention cannot be successful if options for inclusive schooling, movement to economic independence, and stable safe accommodation and housing do not exist for those young people whose situation requires these. This is the business of prevention and whilst early intervention can be creative and flexible it cannot be responsible for the exclusion of young people from social and economic resources necessary for their wellbeing.

Young people are largely defined, at least in a social and economic sense, by their relationship to the key institutions of family, school, work and statutory control. Young people are exposed to the risk of homelessness from a constellation of factors at the structural through to the individual level. Sandwiched between structural and individual causes of youth homelessness is what has been termed 'external' factors (Crane and Brannock 1996) but which are more usefully termed 'institutional' factors. Early intervention can play a role in moderating institutional level causes of homelessness if undertaken as part of systematic engagement with key agencies. The 2006 census conducted by MacKenzie and Chamberlain (2008: 38) found an observable and significant shift between 2001 and 2006 in the availability and embeddedness of early intervention support in schools. A study undertaken by RPR (2003) found strong links between the provision of direct Reconnect early intervention services and the building of greater community capacity for early intervention across agencies. The conclusion is that good early intervention is more than a targeted service to an individual or family- it engages service systems and community based support in processes that enlarge their awareness and capacity to include young people at risk of homelessness and moderate policies and practices at their level that would otherwise exacerbate these risks. In other words early intervention contributes to social inclusion and prevention.

The White Paper recognises institutional level factors in terms of *'poor life transitions ... out of the child protection system, prison, or statutory care'* (p.24). We know that involvement in child protection systems is a key pathway to homelessness (MacKenzie and Chamberlain 2008) and the 'no exists into homelessness' principle identifies one opportunity for timely intervention: the transition from institutional care. Statutory intervention, whether related to juvenile justice or child protection, often contributes to disconnection well before a young person 'exits', and earlier opportunities for 'timely' early intervention certainly exist though these may not currently be recognised. Shouldn't we also demand a 'no exists into homelessness' approach by schools in terms of formal and informal suspension and exclusion? The implication for conceptualising early intervention is that young people's connection to various key systems that provide stability goes beyond instrumental notions of where they reside, attendance and retention. It goes to the quality of that connection and is manifested in their sense of 'belonging' and 'home'. Building and sustaining such connection and interrupting disconnection where the consequence of not doing so threatens the material and relational aspects of having a home, is core business for early intervention in respect of young people.

Early intervention into youth homelessness has generally been conceptualised as part of a continuum of responses. The continuum endorsed by the then Australian Government (PMYHT 1998) positioned prevention at one end and sustained community engagement at the other, with early intervention, crisis accommodation and support, and transitional accommodation and support located in between. The utility of a linear continuum has been questioned by workers involved in responding to family and adult homelessness (REACH Consortia 2006-2007) and a circular model suggested as more reflective of how people often move in and out of housing stability. More work needs to be done conceptualising the relationship between various categories of support and intervention and how early intervention relates to these.

One area for reconsideration is use of the term 'crisis', used to refer to the provision of 'crisis' accommodation or services which deliver a *'crisis response to homelessness'* (White Paper p.40). The term is also used variously to describe someone *'temporarily homeless as a result of a crisis'* (White Paper p.40), and an approach to case work practice involving *'crisis intervention and ongoing support'* (NYCH 2008 p.2). The result is a lack of clarity manifested in different views or confusion regarding the nexus between early intervention and a 'crisis response'. Early intervention is often activated as a response to a felt crisis. Given the White Paper vision of increased articulation between homelessness services and mainstream services, the use of the term 'crisis' as defining a form of accommodation is not helpful.

## Fostering Youth-Centered, Context Responsive Practice

The principle of placing young people's wellbeing and interests at the centre of early intervention practice is echoed in the White Paper principle that *'clients need to be placed at the centre of service delivery and design'* (p.19). The centrality of outcomes for young people needs to be maintained whilst respectfully engaging and working with whatever people and agencies are critical to the young person not becoming homeless. Whilst the young person is the primary client the intervention effort may often be directed to involve those that provide connection or disconnection. 'Connection' can be approached in a functional and instrumental way (eg school retention; living with parents) or in a qualitative way which is relational and 'felt'. While both are arguably important it is this latter interpretation that resonates through the accounts of young people who have been homeless (O'Connor 1989; Crane and Brannock 1996; Gronda 2009). The absence of connection is a 'fractured sense of belonging'.

The craft of good early intervention is to maintain the centrality of outcomes for young people, whilst engaging with and being responsive to the particular local/cultural and situational contexts, flexibly using an appropriate mix of direct and indirect practice strategies.

The complex interplay of institutional and situational factors which are the target of early intervention mean a suite of uniform services cannot be rolled out across the country. Good early intervention programs have to be informed by a robust understanding of their particular context with an emphasis on providing relevant, timely and flexible responses. Program theory (Pawson 2006) supports this suggesting that outcomes are produced by a mechanism being applied into particular contextual conditions. A mechanism may be effective in one context but not another (Gronda 2009). How to build in capacity to deal with high levels of difference between implementation contexts becomes a critical issue for governments, service providers and practitioners.

Utilising participatory action research processes to foster 'joined up' approaches that are outcomes oriented and evidence generating

The White Paper appropriately acknowledges the need for joined up policies and service systems and further the need for evidence based policy and service delivery. The setting of targets for reducing homelessness can be expected to result in strong pressure to achieve outcomes and to provide evidence to support intervention approaches used.

There are substantial barriers and constraints to this. People are complex,

social problems such as homelessness are complex, yet our systems of human organisation including policy and programs understandably gain focus and manageability by simplifying and chunking this complexity into 'bits'. At the coal face of service delivery we are often faced with trying to put the 'bits' back together as we engage with people's lived experience in a person-centered way, optimistically referred to as taking an 'integrated' or 'holistic' approach to practice.

What we need is a shared process technology and language to assist various key parties to do the 'joining up'. We cannot simply rely on organisational mechanisms such as service hubs or agency consortia to be sufficient. Other processes such as community development, community engagement, and action learning have some relevance but are insufficient in providing all the links needed in the current environment between outcome orientation, strategy development, and evaluation.

Participatory action research (PAR) provides a relevant process vehicle for this. Simply put, it is an inquiry process which allows those important to the realisation of a particular social outcome to 'join up' and work together around shared 'What would it take to ... ?' questions. Whilst applicable to a wide range of practice fields it has particular relevance where multiple stakeholders need to participate in seeking solutions. PAR has been an integral component of the Reconnect program since 1996 and has consistently been evaluated as an important element in good early intervention into youth homelessness practice (ARTD 1998, RPR 2003).

The White Paper indicates that *'Action research is important as it helps to improve policy and ensures that best practice and experience can be shared'* (p.20). PAR provides a flow of evidence from the front-line which can inform our understanding of good practice, effective models for particular contexts, and which is complimentary to other types of data at the service and policy levels (Crane and O'Regan).

## Conclusion

It pays to be fussy about the conceptual modelling for social change processes. Early intervention into youth homelessness is an important element within a national approach to preventing homelessness. As part of this we need to appreciate the most critical characteristics of effective early intervention, and put in place processes that lead to increased understanding at local through to national levels, and greater wellbeing for young people. ■

References for this article can be found in full on the Parity section of the CHP web site  
[www.chp.org.au/parity](http://www.chp.org.au/parity)